Project Grant scheme-specific peer review guidelines

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The following sections describe the specific processes, timelines and expectations that apply to the peer review of the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) Project Grant scheme applications.

These scheme-specific peer review guidelines complement and must be read in conjunction with the following supporting documents:

- Guide to NHMRC Peer Review 2018
- NHMRC Funding Rules 2018
- Project Grant scheme-specific funding rules
- NHMRC Advice and Instructions to Applicants 2018
- Project Grant scheme-specific advice and instructions to applicants
- NHMRC Funding Agreement.

It is recommended that you read the Guide to NHMRC Peer Review 2018, before reading these guidelines.

### 1 Overview of the peer review process

A flowchart of the peer review process is provided at Attachment A - Overview of 2018 Project Grants peer review process.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date Range</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>14 March 2018</td>
<td>Applications close in RGMS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Late March 2018</td>
<td>Assigners Academy begins identifying External Assessors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 March to 3 April 2018</td>
<td>Grant Review Panel (GRP) members declare Conflicts of Interest (CoI) against applications and nominate Spokesperson (SP) suitability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Late April 2018</td>
<td>Allocation of applications to panels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Late April 2018</td>
<td>Applications allocated to Primary (1SP) and Secondary (2SP) Spokespersons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 1-3 panels: 1 June 2018 Week 4-6 panels: 22 June 2018</td>
<td>External Assessor reports due</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 1-3 panels: 1 June 2018 Week 4-6 panels: 22 June 2018</td>
<td>1SP and 2SPs complete assessment reports and submit preliminary scores against assessment criteria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 1-3 panels: 8 June 2018 Week 4-6 panels: 29 June 2018</td>
<td>Dates for release of Assessor Reports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 1-3 panels: 18 June 2018 Week 4-6 panels: 9 July 2018</td>
<td>Due dates for submitting Applicant Response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 1-3 panels: 29 June 2018 Week 4-6 panels: 20 July 2018</td>
<td>Due dates for 1SP and 2SP revised scores against assessment criteria taking into account Applicant Response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 1-3 panels: 6 - 10 July 2018 Week 4-6 panels: 27 - 31 July 2018</td>
<td>GRP members consider Not For Further Consideration (NFFC) list and may rescue one application</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 2018</td>
<td>GRP members prepare for GRP meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 July to 7 September 2018</td>
<td>GRP meets to review applications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 2018*</td>
<td>Notification of outcomes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Dates are indicative.
2 Key changes to the peer review process

Assessors who have previously participated in NHMRC peer review should note the following key changes:

- Updated role descriptions for Panel Members, Primary Spokesperson and Secondary Spokesperson in section 3 Roles and responsibilities
- Updated guidance for assignment of application to the Clinical Trials and Cohort Studies (CTCS) Grant Review Panel (GRP) in section 4.1.3 Assignment of Applications to Panels
- Section 4.1.11 Not For Further Consideration no longer specifies the NFFC cut off. This change creates flexibility for NHMRC to set an appropriate NFFC rate in response to a substantial increase in applications.

3 Roles and responsibilities

The roles and responsibilities of those participating in the peer review process are identified in the Project Grant peer review participants table below. These take precedence over the general descriptions in section 6 of the Guide to NHMRC Peer Review 2018.

More information on the duties and responsibilities of GRP members is provided in the GRP videos available on the NHMRC website.

**Project Grant peer review participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Responsibilities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Assigners Academy | NHMRC’s Assigners Academy (the Academy) consists of researchers with extensive knowledge of Australian and international health and medical research and a reputation for integrity. Its key function is to provide independent expert advice on matters relating to the administration of NHMRC’s peer review process. Members of the Academy are recruited from a wide range of research areas. Academy membership can be broadly divided into three categories each with specific roles:  
  - Standard Academy members are responsible for identifying, securing and delivering two assessments by external assessors for each of their assigned applications.  
  - Indigenous health research experts are responsible for verifying whether Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research applications have at least 20% of their research effort or capacity building related to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health.  
  - Clinical trial and cohort study experts are responsible for verifying whether applications with a clinical trial and/or cohort study component should be reviewed by the CTCS GRPs.  
  All Academy members are required to identify and advise NHMRC of all real or potential conflicts of interest they may have with applications under review in their research area.  
  All Academy members may also be invited to fulfil additional tasks, including completing up to six external assessments for applications within their area, and providing advice on membership of peer review panels and assignment of applications to GRPs. |
| Indigenous Health Research Grant Review Panel (IGRP) | Applications deemed to relate to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research will be considered by suitable External Assessors with appropriate discipline based expertise and an Indigenous Health Research Grant Review Panel (IGRP).  
  NHMRC will endeavour to ensure Indigenous researchers constitute at least 50 percent of the IGRP’s membership. Advice on the IGRP membership will be sought from the Assigners Academy and the relevant NHMRC Indigenous |
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Responsibilities</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>advisory committee. The IGRP may be supported by additional independent scientific advisors to inform its assessment of applications.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In addition to assessing applications against the Project Grant scheme assessment criteria, the IGRP will also assess applications against the NHMRC Indigenous Research Excellence Criteria (see section 6.3 of the NHMRC Funding Rules 2018), using the NHMRC Category Descriptors and Assessment Criteria for Health Research Involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (see Attachment B of the Project Grant scheme-specific funding rules).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
|External Assessors| NHMRC endeavours to obtain two written assessments from External Assessors for each application. An External Assessor:  
  - is considered to be an independent reviewer for the application  
  - can be a national or international researcher  
  - is chosen on the basis of their expertise in their field of research to complement the application in question but do not necessarily have expertise to cover the entire application  
  - can be an Assigners Academy member  
  - must identify and advise NHMRC of all real or potential CoI they may have with any aspect of the application prior to undertaking the assessment  
  - will provide written assessments focusing on the key strengths and weaknesses against each of the three assessment criteria including appropriate queries which will then be made available to applicants for response  
  - will provide comment on the budget, where appropriate. |
|Panel Chairs     | The Chair’s role is to ensure NHMRC’s procedures are adhered to and that a fair and equitable consideration is given to every application being reviewed at the GRP meeting. Chairs are independent of the review of research proposals, and must manage the process of peer review in accordance with these Guidelines. Chairs will:  
  Prior to the meeting:  
    - familiarise themselves with documentation relevant to the funding scheme  
    - identify and advise NHMRC of all real or potential CoI they have with applications to be reviewed  
    - familiarise themselves with all the applications being considered.  
  During the meeting:  
    - ask members to declare any associations between panel members  
    - ensure that Observers are fully aware of the names and affiliations of the Chief Investigators (CIs) of applications under discussion and Observers leave the room where a high CoI exists  
    - keep discussions on time and focused  
    - ensure NHMRC procedures are followed  
    - assist members with their duties and understanding what is expected of them  
    - take appropriate action for each declared CoI  
    - promote good engagement by Spokespersons and GRP members in all discussions  
    - ensure that all members consider career disruptions and ‘relative to opportunity’ when discussing applications  
    - ensure the discussion leads to an outcome where the applications are appropriately scored against the Category Descriptors  
    - ensure members are satisfied with score outcomes and appropriately manage any uncertainty  
    - ensure members declare a reason/s for voting two or more away from the 1SP score in any of the three assessment criteria  
    - facilitate the discussion of budgets where required  
    - assist the panel to resolve budget discussions. |
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Responsibilities</th>
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|                           | • ensure that discussions are consistent for all applications  
  • ensure panel members are satisfied with each day's deliberations  
  • ensure applications to be considered for the Marshall and Warren Award meet the aims of the award  
  • through RGMS e-scoring, endorse comments of the review and scoring of applications, record and notify NHMRC of any requests for clarification or advice. |
| Assistant Chairs          | Assistant Chairs will:                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|                           | Prior to the meeting:  
  • familiarise themselves with documentation relevant to the funding scheme  
  • identify and advise NHMRC of all real or perceived CoIs they may have with applications to be reviewed. |
|                           | During the meeting:  
  • note discussions and support the Chairperson to ensure that NHMRC procedures are adhered to.                                                                                                                     |
| Panel Members             | GRP members will:                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|                           | Prior to the meeting:  
  • familiarise themselves with documentation relevant to the funding scheme  
  • identify and advise NHMRC of all real or potential CoI they have with applications to be reviewed  
  • read all documentation including the Assessor Report and the Applicant Responses for each application assigned to the GRP  
  • provide a fair, impartial and scientific assessment against the assessment criteria, using the Category Descriptors  
  • confirm the inclusion of applications on the NFFC list and ‘rescue’ up to one application that warrants discussion if they deem it appropriate. |
|                           | During the meetings:  
  • score each application using RGMS e-scoring  
  • recommend applications for Marshall and Warren discussion where appropriate  
  • nominate External Assessors for the External Assessor Outstanding Contribution Honour Roll where appropriate  
  • prepare for and participate in the panel discussion for each application including budget discussion, where applicable. |
| Primary Spokesperson (1SP)| Prior to the meeting:  
  • review the allocated applications against the assessment criteria  
  • assess any claims for career disruption according to requirements  
  • if required, advise NHMRC if an application allocated to the IGRP does not relate to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health  
  • if required, advise NHMRC if an application allocated to the CTCS GRP is not a clinical trial or cohort study  
  • score the applications using the Category Descriptors as a guide and prepare a Spokesperson report in RGMS for rebuttal by the applicant within the prescribed timeframe  
  • review the Assessor Reports for inappropriate or biased comments  
  • following consideration of the Assessor Report and Applicant Response, re-score the application in RGMS within the prescribed timeframes  
  • prepare speaking notes for each application allocated as 1SP  
  • rigorously assess the proposed budget to ensure that Personal Support Packages (PSPs), Direct Research Costs (DRCs) and equipment requests are appropriate for the project and fully justified  
  • prepare a recommendation for the GRP to either: leave the requested budget intact, propose modifying the budget, or seek advice from the
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Responsibilities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Panel regarding specific budget requests.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| | **At the meeting:**  
| | • provide advice to the panel on the impact of career disruptions if applicable  
| | • lead the discussion using prepared notes  
| | • announce final scores for applications based on discussions  
| | • assist the 2SP in discussion on the appropriateness or otherwise, of the requested budget as required with reference to the individual elements of the budget ensuring PSPs, DRCs and equipment requests are appropriate for the project and fully justified |
| Secondary Spokesperson (2SP) | **Prior to the meeting:**  
| | • review the allocated applications against the assessment criteria  
| | • assess any claims for career disruption according to requirements  
| | • score the applications using the Category Descriptors as a guide and prepare a SP report for rebuttal by the applicant by the deadline  
| | • review the Assessor Report for inappropriate or biased comments  
| | • following consideration of the Assessor Report and Applicant Response, re-score the application in RGMS by the deadline  
| | • prepare speaking notes for each application assigned to them as 2SP focusing on the Assessor Report and Applicant Response  
| | • rigorously assess the proposed budget to ensure that PSPs, DRCs and equipment requests are appropriate for the project and fully justified  
| | • prepare a recommendation for the GRP to either: leave the requested budget intact, propose modifying the budget, or seek advice from the panel regarding specific budget requests. |
| | **At the meeting:**  
| | • add to the 1SP comments and discussion with reference to prepared notes  
| | • ensure External Assessor(s) comments, specifically the strengths and weaknesses raised, are presented  
| | • ensure that the Applicant Response is presented  
| | • provide final scores for applications based on discussions  
| | • present a recommendation to either: leave the requested budget intact, propose modifying the budget, or seek advice from the panel regarding specific budget  
| | • lead the budget discussion if required. |
| Office of NHMRC - Research Scientists | NHMRC staff with extensive research expertise will be involved in:  
| | • establishing the membership of the GRPs  
| | • allocating applications to panels and spokespersons  
| | • assisting and advising on the GRP process  
| | • chairing or assistant chairing some GRPs. |
| Office of NHMRC - Secretariat | **Prior to the meeting:**  
| | • act as the first point of contact for members  
| | • approach potential GRP members, on advice from NHMRC Research Scientists and the Assigners Academy  
| | • provide administrative support and advice to the Chair, Assistant Chair and members  
| | • prepare the list of Not For Further Consideration (NFFC) applications  
| | • prepare the order in which applications will be reviewed  
| | • notify NHMRC Research Scientists of any requests for clarification or advice. |
| | **At the meeting:**  
| | • operate RGMS e-scoring processes  
| | • advise the Chair if process points have been overlooked  
<p>| | • as applicable, record budget adjustments on recommendation from the panel |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Responsibilities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• record outcomes of recommendations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• flag applications for Marshall and Warren Award discussion, including the final recommendation and manage the Col process for discussion of the nominations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Observers</td>
<td>NHMRC invites respected members of the general community to sit in on the GRP meetings to observe that NHMRC policy and procedures are being adhered to. The Observers assist NHMRC in ensuring that the assessment of all applications is fair, equitable and impartial. Observers will be briefed on GRP procedures prior to the meeting. They will not participate in the discussion of any application, and will be identified by name tags. At the meeting: • identify and advise the Chair of all real or potential conflicts they have with applications on their GRP • monitor the procedural aspects of the GRPs • provide feedback to NHMRC on the consistency of procedures across all GRPs. Observers may raise issues of a general nature with NHMRC Research Scientists who may communicate these issues at the Chair’s Meetings. Observers are subject to the same CoI requirements as GRP members. Where a high CoI exists, the Observer will leave the room.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4 Peer review process

NHMRC’s peer review process is designed to provide a rigorous, fair, transparent and consistent assessment of the merits of each application according to the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research to ensure that only the highest quality, value for money research is recommended for funding (see section 11.2 of the NHMRC Funding Rules 2018).

All applications, including those for New Investigator, Cancer Council and Cancer Australia funding, are assessed against the assessment criteria as set out in the Project Grant scheme-specific funding rules, using the Project Grant Category Descriptors (see Attachment A of the Project Grant scheme-specific funding rules). Applications that are accepted to relate to the improvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health are also assessed against the Indigenous Research Excellence Criteria (set out in section 6.3 of the NHMRC Funding Rules) using the NHMRC Category Descriptors and Assessment Criteria for Health Research Involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (see Attachment B of the Project Grant scheme-specific funding rules). Applications are assessed relative to opportunity taking into consideration any career disruptions (see section 6.2 of the NHMRC Funding Rules 2018).

An overview of the peer review process can be found in Attachment A – Overview of 2018 Project Grant peer review process, with further details provided below in section 4.1 Before the GRP Meeting.

4.1 Before the GRP Meeting

4.1.1 Establishment of the Grant Review Panel

The number of GRPs formed will depend on the total number and type of applications received. Each GRP will be led by a Chair with support from an Assistant Chair. Both will be independent and will not participate in the assessment or scoring of applications. Each panel is supported by a dedicated NHMRC Secretariat who will support GRP operations.

The number of members on each GRP will vary depending on the number and type of applications received. Panel members are chosen for their expertise and experience by NHMRC Research.
Scientists. The Guiding Principles for GRP establishment endorsed by Research Committee (NHMRC Principles of Peer Review outlined in the NHMRC Guide to NHMRC Peer Review 2018) are applied when determining membership.

NHMRC endeavours to limit occurrences where the CI on an application is a member of the GRP that is reviewing their application. NHMRC will endeavour to avoid instances where the GRP Chair or Assistant Chair is a CI on an application being reviewed by the panel.

Information will not be revealed to the applicant regarding which GRP their application has been allocated to or the membership of that panel.

4.1.2 External Assessors

The Assigners Academy is responsible for obtaining up to two External Assessors for each application.

External Assessors provide expert advice to the GRP members on how well the applicant has addressed the assessment criteria in a specific field of research and its weaknesses, and may also focus on aspects of the application that require further clarification.

Potential External Assessors will be asked to identify any CoI prior to gaining access to the full application. If the nominated External Assessor has declared low or no conflict, they will be provided access to the full application in RGMS.

External Assessors will submit their assessment in RGMS. Assessments will provide comments addressing all three assessment criteria and will use the Category Descriptors as a guide (see Attachment A of the Project Grant scheme-specific funding rules). They may also comment on the proposed budget and include any additional comments and questions they may have for the applicant.

External Assessors should focus on the strengths and weaknesses of the application. The report should help clarify outstanding questions and provide constructive criticism of the application. The report should not provide scores, contain inappropriate language, or comments/questions inconsistent with assessment criteria.

NHMRC will not preview Assessor comments. Assessors must ensure their reports do not contain inappropriate or defamatory remarks (see section 6.1 of the Guide to NHMRC Peer Review 2018).

Where Assessors believe the proposed research is replicating previous research, they may raise this in their assessment providing references so applicants have the opportunity to respond in their rebuttal.

4.1.3 Assignment of applications to panels

Applications are allocated to a GRP primarily based on the applicant's nominated ‘best fit’ peer review panel. Allocation may also be informed by the proposed field of research, and other key words entered into RGMS. Where the applicant has nominated a peer review area that is unlikely to provide appropriate expertise, NHMRC scientific staff will identify a more appropriate GRP to conduct the peer review. The Assigners Academy will endeavour to secure external assessments, where appropriate, to fill expertise gaps on a panel.

Once allocated, each application will be assigned two SPs from the GRP who will assess it against the assessment criteria using the Category Descriptors (see Attachment A of the Project Grant scheme-specific funding rules).

Particular considerations apply to the assignment of applications to the CTCS GRPs and IGRP (see below).

Assignment of Applications to CTCS GRPs

All applications involving a clinical trial or cohort study will be identified using information provided by the applicant.

Applicants are asked to use the NHMRC Clinical Trials and Cohort Studies Decision Chart (Attachment B of the Project Grant scheme-specific advice and instructions to applicants) to determine if their application should be considered by a CTCS GRP. Assigners Academy members with clinical trials and cohort studies expertise, in consultation with NHMRC scientific staff, will determine whether the proposed research is a clinical trial or cohort study and, according to the
Clinical Trials and Cohort Studies Decision Chart, whether it should be assessed by a CTCS GRP. An application may be reallocated to a GRP not nominated by the applicant in the instance where a more appropriate review will be given by a different GRP. Guidance on research to be considered a clinical trial is outlined in Attachment B of the Project Grant scheme-specific advice and instructions to applicants.

Assignment of Applications to the IGRP

Applications involving research relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health will be identified using information provided by the applicant.

Assigners Academy members with Indigenous health expertise, in consultation with NHMRC scientific staff, will confirm that applications have at least 20% of their research effort and/or capacity building focused on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health. Those applications deemed appropriate will be subject to NHMRC’s Indigenous Research Excellence Criteria and associated Category Descriptors (section 6.3 of the NHMRC Funding Rules 2018 and Attachment B of the Project Grant scheme-specific funding rules respectively). The extent to which the application fulfils these criteria in relation to research into the health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, including documentation and other relevant written evidence where appropriate, will be considered by the IGRP and suitable External Assessors with appropriate expertise.

NHMRC may, where necessary, require a Primary Spokesperson on the IGRP to confirm whether an application has at least 20% of the research effort and/or capacity building focused on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health.

Additional guidance for assessors to assess the criteria for health research involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples can be found at Attachment C – Guidance on the assessment of applications against the Indigenous Research Excellence Criteria. Applicants will be provided with an opportunity to respond to the assessment against the Indigenous Research Excellence Criteria in their Applicant Response.

4.1.4 Identification of GRP member conflicts

Panel Members will be provided access in RGMS to the Snapshot Summary Report of each relevant application and will be asked to declare any CoIs. Members will only be given access to the full application if they have low or no CoI. For information on what constitutes a CoI refer to section 4.3.2 of the Guide to NHMRC Peer Review 2018.

Members are asked to notify the GRP Secretariat immediately if a CoI is identified later in the process. It is important that all CoI are declared early. CoI that are not declared until late in the assessment process or GRP meetings will cause delays in the process. Panel members are required to review and confirm all NHMRC CoI rulings in advance of the meeting.

4.1.5 Allocation of Spokesperson

While declaring their CoI, panel members will indicate their suitability to act as a Spokesperson on applications based on their expertise. NHMRC Research Scientists, with guidance from the Assigners Academy where necessary, will allocate SPs to each application based on the indicated suitability and declared CoI. Panel members will be notified of their allocations.

When indicating expertise, GRP members should have at least a moderate or high level of expertise for the majority of applications allocated to the panel. Members should only indicate no expertise in cases where they feel strongly that they do not have any expertise to assess the application. In the event that there is insufficient expertise on a panel, every effort will be made to secure additional expertise.

4.1.6 GRP members access applications

All panel members will be provided with access to the full application where there is no or low CoI. When accessing the full application, panel members should re-check whether they have a CoI not previously evident.

GRP members who become aware of any previously undeclared CoI should contact the NHMRC Secretariat immediately. The panel member will be required to delete or destroy any files in their possession pertaining to applications with which they have declared a late high CoI.
4.1.7 Preparation of Spokespersons reports and initial scores

The 1SP and 2SP prepare a Spokesperson report that will be provided to the applicant as part of the Assessors’ Report. The Spokesperson report should discuss the key strengths and weaknesses of the application (see section 6.1 of the Guide to NHMRC Peer Review 2018) and include questions on those aspects of the application that require clarification, including the appropriateness of the requested budget. To ensure impartiality and independence of assessments the Spokespersons must not discuss the application and will not have access to External Assessor reports.

NHMRC will not preview assessors’ comments. Assessors must ensure that their reports do not contain inappropriate or defamatory remarks. Further guidance on what may be considered inappropriate remarks and additional guidance on assessment do’s and don’ts can be found at section 6.1 of the Guide to NHMRC Peer Review 2018.

At this point, the 1SP and 2SP will also provide initial scores in RGMS against each assessment criterion using the seven-point scale (see Attachment A of the Project Grant scheme-specific funding rules). Further guidance on how to assess applications against each assessment criterion, can be found at Attachment B – Guidance on the assessment of applications against the Project Grant assessment criteria and Attachment C – Guidance on the assessment of applications against the Indigenous Research Excellence Criteria.

4.1.8 Release of Assessor Reports

The Spokesperson and External Assessor reports will be collated into the Assessor Report and made available to applicants through RGMS. The Assessor Report will be released to applicants on one of the two release dates (see section 1 Overview of the peer review process). NHMRC endeavours to release Assessor Reports with assessments from two External Assessors and both SPs. Assessor Reports may not be released on the published date if the assessments have not been submitted.

The provision of the Assessor Report to applicants is dependent upon the timely provision and availability of reports from the Spokespersons and External Assessors and therefore may occur outside of the indicative time periods. Where significant delays occur, applicants will be notified.

The comments provided in the Assessor Report are not an indication of the final outcome of the application.

4.1.9 Applicant Response

Instructions on the required format of Applicant Response and the due date will be provided in the notification of release of the Assessor Report.

The response should address the questions raised and is not an opportunity to modify the proposed research plan.

Applicants will be allowed up to 10 days, inclusive of weekends and public holidays, in which to submit their Applicant Response.

4.1.10 Spokesperson reassessment of applications

Once the Applicant Responses have been received, the 1SP and 2SP for each application will consider the research proposal in conjunction with the Assessor Report and Applicant Response. The 1SP and 2SP will then be asked to review their initial scores and may rescore the application in RGMS against each of the three assessment criteria.

4.1.11 Not For Further Consideration

The Not for Further Consideration (NFFC) process aims to identify and remove applications that are assessed as being less competitive than others on the panel. As less than 20% of applications are expected to be funded only the most competitive applications will progress to a full panel discussion. The Spokespersons’ scores, following review of the Assessor Report and Applicant Response, will determine the ranked list for each panel.

The least competitive applications will form a preliminary NFFC list and will be provided to respective panel members before the GRP meeting. Each panel member has the opportunity to rescue one application from the NFFC list if they believe an application warrants full review at the
GRP meeting. Once the NFFC list has been finalised, the GRP secretariat will release a running order for the GRP meeting. Applications not on the NFFC list will proceed to full review.

**Exclusion criteria**

An application will be excluded from NFFC for the following reasons:

- NHMRC has not received a score and an assessment for all criteria from both the 1SP and 2SP and an assessment from at least one External Assessor.
- Overall weighted scores from the Spokespersons are two or more points away from each other and the notional score of either 1SP or 2SP ordinarily would have placed the application amongst the most competitively ranked applications.
- It is an NHMRC New Investigator or Cancer Australia Young Investigator application and the overall weighted score is 4.501 or above.
- If a high CoI is declared by the 1SP or 2SP after the release of the Assessor Report.
- The application may be excluded if it relates to an NHMRC strategic research investment priority, as determined by NHMRC, and achieves a notional score of 4.001 or higher.

4.2 Grant Review Panel meeting

Each GRP will meet for up to five days (depending on the number of applications per panel) to review each application allocated to the panel. GRP meetings commence on a Monday. An induction video providing panel members with information on their duties and responsibilities is available on the NHMRC website.

**Quorum**

A quorum is regarded as 50 percent plus one of the appointed members. If there are an uneven number of members, a majority is the next full number after 50 percent (e.g., seven in the case of 13 members). In situations where a number of members have identified a high CoI on an application, the scoring quorum cannot be less than one-third of the GRP membership present at the meeting.

NHMRC will endeavour to identify, prior to GRP meetings, those applications that do not have a scoring quorum and obtain a suitably qualified member from another panel meeting to participate in panel discussion and to score that application.

4.2.1 Declaration of inter-relationships

Suggested time limit: 30 minutes

When members (including the Chair, Assistant Chair and Secretariat) meet face-to-face for the first time, each panel member will be invited to briefly describe their expertise and previous peer review experience. During their introductions, members will be asked to declare any relationships with other panel members including:

- current and previous collaborations
- former student/teacher/mentoring relationships
- common employment/institutional relationships
- other relationships that may, or be seen to, impair fair and impartial assessment.

4.2.2 Chair to announce the application

Suggested time limit: 2 minutes

The Chair will announce the application to be discussed including the title, Administering Institution/s and the CIs.

The Chair will identify any members who have previously identified a CoI with the application. Those members with a high CoI will be asked to leave the room.

The Chair will invite members to declare any late CoI with the application. If a member declares a new CoI, or wishes to discuss any concerns related to an existing CoI, the matter will be discussed with the panel. It is up to the remaining panel members to determine if the new interest constitutes a high CoI and if the declaring panel member should leave the room. The details of the late CoI will be
recorded by the NHMRC. As this decision making can take extra time, it is important that all CoI are declared and decided upon well in advance of the meeting, where possible.

If a CoI is declared at the GRP meeting by a 1SP or 2SP, which prevents them from participating in the assessment of the application, a new 1SP or 2SP will be assigned to the application and the scores from the initial Spokesperson will be discarded. Discussion of the application will be moved to later in the week where possible to give the new SP time to prepare.

Once highly conflicted members have left the room (those with a low CoI remain in the panel room), the Chair will announce the category of funding the application relates to (e.g., NHMRC, NHMRC New Investigator and/or Cancer Australia and/or Cancer Council, CAYI) and if there were any career disruptions claimed. The Chair will then identify the Spokespersons and External Assessors and announce the Spokesperson scores for each of the three assessment criteria.

4.2.3 1SP to comment on the application

Suggested time limit: 8 minutes

The 1SP will:

- set out the impact of any career disruption/s (where applicable)
- discuss the application’s strengths and weaknesses against the three assessment criteria
- ensure relevant considerations (e.g., research track record relative to opportunity and career disruptions etc.) are highlighted
- not make reference to the budget at this stage.

4.2.4 2SP to comment on the application

Suggested time limit: 6 minutes

The 2SP will:

- present the External Assessors’ views
- present the Applicant Response
- briefly highlight their agreement/disagreement with the 1SP and External Assessors’ comments
- not make reference to the budget at this stage.

4.2.5 Full panel discussion

Suggested time limit: 5 minutes

The Chair will open discussion to the panel. GRP members have an opportunity to ask questions of both Spokespersons; discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the application; and ensure that relevant considerations are taken into account.

The Chair must ensure adequate review of the application occurs, that all members get a fair opportunity to comment and no member exerts undue influence over others.

4.2.6 Scoring by members

Suggested time limit: 3 minutes

Following the panel’s discussion, the Chair will ask the Spokespersons to confirm their three criterion scores noting that these may change as a result of the panel discussion.

The Chair will then ask if any member intends to score two or more points away from any of the 1SP’s three criterion scores. If so, the member must declare this and provide a brief justification.

All members in the room, excluding the Chair and Assistant Chair, must independently score the application through RGMS e-scoring. All scoring members will provide scores against the three assessment criteria using the seven-point scale as reference. At the completion of scoring, the GRP Secretariat will announce the following results:
1. Rating - the rating will be determined by including each voting member's score for each of the assessment criteria. The rating, as calculated arithmetically to three decimal places, will take account of the weighting of each criterion.

2. Category - this will be deemed, based on the calculated rating, as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating range</th>
<th>Deemed category</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.001 - 1.500</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.501 - 2.500</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>2.501 - 3.500</td>
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<td>4.501 - 5.500</td>
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<td>5.501 - 6.500</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>6.501 - 7.000</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Where members have concerns regarding the final score, the Chair should invite further discussion. If the panel collectively determines that reassessment is warranted, members will be invited to independently rescore that application. Panel members should not aim to achieve a consensus score, nor take into consideration the potential overall ranking or funding outcome of an application.

4.2.7 Discussion by exception of proposed budget

Suggested time limit: 5 minutes

Budget discussions should not commence until the NHMRC Secretariat has announced the rating and category. Applications with a score of 5.001 or greater (top half of category 5) will trigger a discussion of the budget.

Exceptions include:

- New Investigator status applications – will have a budget discussion with a score of 4.501 and above.
- Electromagnetic Energy and IGRP applications – will have budget discussions with a score of 4.001 and above (top half of category 4).

Budget discussions occur only where the 2SP has made a recommendation to discuss the budget. The Chair will facilitate the budget discussion to ensure applications are considered fairly and equitably. The 2SP will lead the budget discussion and comment on the appropriateness of the outlined costs and provide any recommendations. The 1SP should be prepared to assist the 2SP if required. Other panel members may also provide relevant comments. Where the GRP deems the proposed budget is in excess of that required to accomplish the research objectives, appropriate reductions may be recommended and reasons recorded by the Assistant Chair and NHMRC Secretariat.

NHMRC will record budget recommendations as agreed by the panel. NHMRC will check the budget recommendations to ensure the budgets have been recorded correctly.

Clinical Trial (CT) applications

In the case of CT applications the CTCS GRPs may recommend NHMRC fund a proportion of the proposed budget with the expectation that the applicant will secure the remaining funds from other sources. NHMRC may require applicants to obtain co-funding as a prerequisite for NHMRC support.

4.2.8 Reconciliation and further review of applications

At the end of each day’s deliberations, a reconciliation of applications reviewed will take place. This process gives members an opportunity to raise any concerns regarding applications that have been reviewed throughout the day.

Where a member believes an application may have been reviewed in an inconsistent manner, they should raise the matter with the Chair. The NHMRC Secretariat will ensure that members with high CoIs leave the room prior to discussing the application and the reason for concern.
In the event that the Chair determines an application needs to be reassessed, the application will be reopened for discussion and rescored independently by the panel at the next opportunity, e.g., the following day.

The Chair may also revisit budget discussions at the end of each day to ensure consistency was achieved.

4.2.9 Marshall and Warren Award

Each year NHMRC may designate at least one highly innovative and potentially transformative Project Grant for the Marshall and Warren Award(s).

Applications nominated for this award will be highly innovative therefore scoring high for the Significance and/or Innovation criterion, but overall may not be as competitive as other applications.

Where more than one application is nominated, the Chair and NHMRC Secretariat will request the panel nominate only one application for the Award at the end of the meeting (the NHMRC Secretariat will manage CoI throughout the nomination process).

The 1SP for the nominated application will then be asked to provide NHMRC with two to four sentences justifying the nomination.

4.3 Post GRP meeting

After the meetings conclude the following steps occur:

1) Applications ranked: scores are linearised to ensure that NHMRC funds the same proportion of category 5 applications from each GRP. This minimises any potential panel-specific bias.

The linearised score is used to determine the ultimate funding cut-off and to prepare a consolidated list from which funding recommendations are developed.

2) Funding recommendations: NHMRC will review the list of applications and determine which applications will be recommended for funding. Research Committee recommends those applications to be funded through NHMRC Council to the CEO who submits them for approval to the Minister with portfolio responsibility for NHMRC.

3) Funding announcements: subsequent to Ministerial approval, applicants and RAOs will be advised of the outcome of applications through RGMS, which may be subject to an embargo.

4) Preparation of Application Assessment Summary: all applicants not deemed NFFC seeking NHMRC funding will receive numerical feedback in the form of an Application Assessment Summary following the announcement of outcomes. NFFC applications will not receive Application Assessment Summaries and are instead directed to the Assessor Report.

5) Funding from other organisations: applications assessed by the GRP as fundable but are not funded and asked to be considered by another organisation will have their application forwarded to the relevant organisation/s for their consideration and outcome notification.

4.4 GRP documentation

GRP members must retain their speaking notes and any other notes they make of the peer review process until the outcomes of the panel’s deliberations are finalised. For GRP meetings this is following discussion of the last application and the Secretariat has confirmed all data entry is complete. After this time notes, both hard copy and electronic, should be disposed of appropriately.
5 Attachments

Attachment A - Overview of 2018 Project Grants peer review process
Attachment B - Additional guidance for assessors to assess the Project Grants assessment criteria
Attachment C - Guidance for assessors to assess applications against the Indigenous Research Excellence Criteria
Attachment A – Overview of 2018 Project Grant peer review process

Applications are submitted.

March*
Assigners Academy identifies EAs.
Eligibility and panel nominations are reviewed and applications are assigned to panels.

SPs and EAs make CoI and suitability declarations.

Declarations are reviewed.

EAs provide reports.

SPs are allocated.

SPs provide initial scores and reports.

Assessor Reports are released and applicants may submit their Applicant Response.

July*
SPs review Applicant Response and may rescore.

NFFC lists are generated.

Members review applications and may rescue one.

August*
Grant Review Panel meetings are held in Canberra.

Applications are ranked and funding recommendations are prepared.

Members complete survey.

Research Committee and Council consider funding recommendations and advise CEO to approve.

Funding recommendations are approved by the Minister for Health.

Assessment results of partner funding applications are sent to partners.

October* Applicants are notified of outcomes.

*Dates are indicative.
Attachment B – Guidance on the assessment of applications against the Project Grant assessment criteria

As per section 4 of the *Project Grant scheme-specific funding rules*, all applications are assessed against the three assessment criteria:

- Scientific Quality (50%)
- Significance of the Expected Outcomes AND/OR Innovation of the Concept (25%)
- Team Quality and Capability, relevant to the application - relative to opportunity, taking into account career disruptions where applicable (25%).

The following advice should be taken into consideration when preparing and assessing applications.

**Scientific Quality (50%)**

This includes the clarity of the hypotheses or research objectives, the strengths and weaknesses of the study design and feasibility.

Applications may be assessed in terms of, but not limited to the following questions.

**Clarity of the hypothesis or research objectives**

- Has the method/framework/approach been partially tested?
- What outcome is sought in the proposed study? What exactly is the outcome measure?
- Is it well integrated and adequately developed?

**Is there a clear and appropriate research plan?**

- What are the strengths and weaknesses of the study and its design?
- Have any major pitfalls or problems been overlooked? Are there more advanced and appropriate alternative approaches that should be used or considered?
- Is the plan well informed by knowledge of the literature?
- Is the design appropriate for the aims of the research?
- That is robust and enables reproducibility of research (see section 4.10 of the *Guide to NHMRC Peer Review 2018*)?

**Feasibility**

- Does the research plan successfully address the stated hypothesis or research objectives?
- Are the goals achievable?
- Is the team appropriate? Are they capable of achieving the goals? Do they have the right skills and expertise?
- Do they team, including Associate Investigators, have all the required tools and techniques established in their laboratories?
- Is the team, including Associate Investigators, operating in an appropriately supportive research environment?

**Significance of the Expected Outcomes AND/OR Innovation of the Concept (25%)**

This includes the potential to increase knowledge about human health, disease diagnoses, or biology of agents that affect human health, or the application of new ideas, procedures, technologies, programs or health policy settings to important topics that will impact on human health.

Applications need not be rated on both significance and innovation. Truly innovative ideas and research may not reveal their significance until sometime in the future (this is the case for many Nobel Prize winning discoveries). Similarly research of the highest significance such as important randomised clinical trials or public health intervention studies may use ‘tried and true’ methods only, yet be of immense significance to health.

Applications may be assessed in terms of, but not limited to the following questions.
**Significance**

- Would the likely outcome of this study significantly advance knowledge in this field?
- If successful, will the study have a significant impact on the health issue at question?
  - Impact could be measured by advancement in general scientific knowledge, clinical and/or public health applications, policy development or change
  - The significance of the study is not a measure of the prevalence/incidence of the health issue (e.g. cancer versus sudden infant death syndrome)
- What is the likely interest from other researchers, conference organisers, journals, community groups, and policy makers in the outcomes of the research?

**Innovation**

- Is the proposed research new/novel or creative (has imagination been used)?
- Are the aims transformative?
- Are the techniques cutting edge?
- If successful, could the research result in a paradigm shift?
- Will the research affect current practices or approaches and other researchers within this field of research?
- Is the research proposal a strong candidate for the Marshall and Warren Award?
- Is the proposed study innovative enough that it will be the subject of invited plenary presentations at international meetings?
- Is it likely that the results from the study will yield highly influential publications?
- How well does the proposal describe the new ideas, procedures, technologies, programs or health policy settings?

**Team Quality and Capability – relative to opportunity (25%)**

Team Quality and Capability is considered in terms of whether an applicant's previous research demonstrates that the investigator(s) has the appropriate mix of research skills and experience to achieve the proposed project and/or ability to deliver the proposed project. Team Quality and Capability will be judged on the most recent five years, except where there is a career disruption.

Where an application involves a CI team, the combined track record of all CIs is considered and each CI will be assessed relative to opportunity (including career stage). The assessment of the team is not weighted to the CIA but the team as a whole. Associate Investigators are not considered as part of the team track record.

NHMRC strongly encourages research teams to include early career researchers (ECRs). The contribution of ECRs and their capability/capacity (relative to opportunity) to undertake the proposed research under the mentoring of experienced team members will be taken into consideration when assessing against this criterion.

Team Quality and Capability may encompass the national and international standing of the applicant(s) based upon their research achievements, including but not limited to:

- research outputs relevant to the proposed field of research (most recent significant publications, publications that illustrate innovation and significance to past accomplishments, impact or outcome of previous research achievements, including effects on health care practices or policy, awards or honours in recognition of achievements).
- contribution to discipline or area (invitations to speak at international meetings, editorial appointments, specialist and high level health policy committee appointments).
- other research-related achievements (influence on clinical/health policy or practice or provision of influential advice to health authorities and government, impacts on health via the broad dissemination of research outcomes; e.g. via mainstream media, the community or industry involvement).
- mentoring environment to support junior/emerging researchers.

Team Quality and Capability is considered in relation to opportunity, with regard to factors such as career disruption, administrative and clinical/teaching load, and typical performance (including publications) for the field in question. See section 6.2 of the NHMRC Funding Rules 2018 for detailed descriptions of relative to opportunity and career disruptions. This also includes appropriately recognising an applicant's industry relevant experience and outputs (see Attachment A of the Guide to NHMRC Peer Review 2018).
Attachment C – Guidance on the assessment of applications against the Indigenous Research Excellence Criteria

The points below will be taken into consideration when assessing applications that relate to the improvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health. The points should be addressed throughout the application and exclusively within the Indigenous criteria part of the application.

Community engagement

- Does the proposal clearly demonstrate thorough and a culturally appropriate level of engagement with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community or health services prior to submission of the application?
- Is there clear evidence that the level of engagement throughout the project will ensure the feasibility of the proposed study?
- Has the application demonstrated evidence that any of the methods, objectives or key elements of the proposed work have been formed, influenced or defined by the community?
- Were the Indigenous community instrumental in identifying and inviting further research into the health issue? Will the research outcomes directly benefit the ‘named’ communities?
- Is there a history of working together with the ‘named’ communities e.g., co-development of the grant, involvement in pilot studies or how the ‘named’ communities will have input/control over the research process and outcomes across the life of the project?

Sustainability and transferability

- Does the proposal:
  - provide a convincing argument that the outcomes will have a positive impact on the health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples which can be maintained after the study has been completed?
  - have relevance to other Indigenous communities?
  - clearly plan for and articulate a clear approach to knowledge translation and exchange?
  - demonstrate the findings are likely to be taken up in health services and/or policy?
- Will the outcomes from the study make a lasting contribution to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and their wellbeing?

Benefit

- Does the proposal clearly outline the potential health benefits (both intermediate and long term, direct and indirect) to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people?
- Does the proposal demonstrate the benefit(s) of the project have been determined or guided by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, communities or organisations themselves?

Building capability

- Does the proposal outline how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and/or communities will benefit from capability development?
- Does the proposal outline how researchers and individuals/groups associated with proposal will develop capabilities that allow them to have a greater understanding/engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples?
- Is there opportunity for two-way Chief Investigator/Associate Investigator capacity development for both non-Indigenous and Indigenous investigators?